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Istook Secures High-Tech Funds for Oklahoma

Washington, D.C. -- A major bill passed by Congress includes several initiatives by Congressman Ernest Istook (R-OK) to move Oklahoma into a higher-tech 21st century.

The Labor, Health and Human Services and Education Appropriations bill for FY 2002 contains funds for handheld computers for Oklahoma students, increased broadband access for Oklahoma, and greater federal resources for medical research in Oklahoma.

“High-speed Internet access, leading-edge handheld computers in schools, medical research funding – these are essentials for a modern Oklahoma. I want our young people to enjoy a world of opportunities right here in Oklahoma,” said Istook.

The spending measure includes a further \$1 million for an Internet hub centered in Ponca City; \$1 million to provide handheld computers to Oklahoma students; \$350,000 to help Oklahoma State University coordinate community broadband access; and \$300,000 to help start a new bioinformatics program at the Oklahoma Health Sciences Center.

The \$1 million federal grant for handheld computers adds to earlier funds secured by Istook and will to be overseen by the State Superintendent’s office and coordinated with the University of Central Oklahoma in Edmond.

“It’s a dramatic leap forward when each student has personal 24-by-7 computer access, rather than occasionally sharing a computer,” said Istook. The handheld technology also offers many cost-saving possibilities such as e-textbooks that can be updated easily without expensive printing and shipping. Currently Oklahoma Public Schools have a ratio of 6:1 students to computers. The handheld computers are to be purchased for about \$200 each, meaning 5,000 upper-grade students may receive a personal handheld.

“This helps Oklahoma to take a unique lead using this technology,” said Istook. **“Those who jump in first will enjoy the most benefits. Our students will be better prepared for high-paying work, and more businesses will be attracted to Oklahoma if we’re on the cutting edge of technology.”**

The Internet \$1 million adds to an earlier \$4.5 million and may be followed by another \$1 million in a few months. These will help construct a high-speed broadband Internet hub centered in Ponca City, part of a public-private effort for education and economic development. It's in cooperation with the City of Ponca City, Conoco, the Ponca City Chamber of Commerce, and the Oklahoma Regents for Higher Education. The \$350,000 for OSU is for coordination with other public telecommunications projects, including the Ponca City project and the Oklahoma Municipal League.

"This helps narrow the 'digital divide' in Oklahoma," said Istook. **"Internet access is becoming as vital to rural Oklahoma as electricity and phone lines are. I’m working to help link together the efforts by businesses, communities, universities, and groups like the Oklahoma Municipal League to build infrastructure. This is more than just a high-speed network and Internet access. It’s also major interactive links for education, and a key to economic development attracting high-tech businesses.”**